

EPITOME

I

I MIGHT begin with a recital of the conversation that led up to his remark; but Chet has taught me the value of selection, the importance of elimination, by the way he has of setting before me just such a curt and poignant drama as this one was. "The last time I had a fight," said Chet, "was with a boy that was my best friend."

We had been in the alder swamps and across the birch knolls all that day after woodcock and partridge, tramping the countryside in a flood of autumn sunshine that was more stimulating than any of man's concoctions; had brought home a partridge or two, and our fair allotment of woodcock; and had dined thereafter on other birds, killed three days before, which had been hanging since then in the cool of the deep cellar. Now our dogs were asleep upon the rugs at our feet; our pipes were going; and the best hour of the day was come.

"What did you fight about?" I asked.

"Fishing," Chet told me. "We used to always fish Marsh Brook, where you and I went last summer. Where you caught the big trout in that hole in the woods. Remember?"

I nodded. The memory was very sweetly clear.

"That brook starts way in behind the mountain," Chet reminded me. "It swings down through the old meadow and into the woods, and through the lower meadow there, and finally it runs into Marsh River. There weren't the trout in it then that there are now. It's been stocked right along, the last few years. . . . But there were trout there, even then. If I told you the fish I've seen my father take out of some of those holes, it would surprise you."

"It's a beautiful brook," I agreed.

"Jim and I always used to fish it," Chet went on. "When we started in, we'd draw lots to see who'd take the first hole, and then take turns after that. He took a pebble in one hand, this day; and I picked the hand that had the pebble in it, so I had the choice. And we started up the brook, me fishing the hole under that log above the bridge, and him fishing the next bend where the bank has all fell in and spoiled the hole, years ago. And I fished under the big rock below the fence; and so on.

"Jim was a fellow that loved fishing," Chet continued; and I interrupted long enough to ask:

"Jim who?"

"Jim Snow," said Chet. "He loved fishing, and he liked getting into the woods. He was a boy that always played a lot of games with himself, in his imagination. We were only about ten years old. And this day he was an Indian. You could see it in the way he walked, and the way he crawled around, except when he got excited and forgot. There was always a change in him when we climbed up out of the lower meadow

into the real woods. He'd begin to whisper, and his eyes to shine. And he'd talk to the trout in the pools; and he was always seeing wildcat, or moose, or bear, in the deeps of the woods.

"I never knew any one it was more fun to go around the country with than Jim."

He was still for a moment, tasting the sweets of memory; and he chuckled to himself before he spoke again.

"Well," he said, "we come up out of the meadow into the woods. You've fished there. It's the best part of the brook now, and it was then. My winning when we drew lots in the beginning made it my turn to fish when we came to the big hole. And Jim knew it as well as me." He chuckled again. "You know the hole I mean. Where that old gray birch leans out over."

I did know. The brook ran through the heart of a grove of old first growth pine; and the big hole itself was dark and shadowed. The water dropped into it over a ledge a few inches high; spread wide and deep upon a clear and sandy bottom, and spilled out at the foot of the hole over the gravel bar. There was an old pine on one bank, at the upper end, leaning somewhat over the water; and on the opposite side of the brook, a huge gray birch leaned to meet the pine. Except on sunny days, the spot was gloomy. More than once I heard great owls hooting in muffled tones among those pines; and the number and ferocity of the mosquitoes which dwell thereabouts is unbelievable.

"It hasn't changed much, all this time," Chet went on. "That slough on the west bank, in that

spring hole, was there then, the same as it is now. Maybe you've noticed an old stub, rotting away, right beside that slough. That was a blasted hemlock; and it's been dead a long time. Wind, or lightning, or something knocked it down.

"When we came up to that hole that day, I was on the side toward the pine; and I crept in behind the big tree that leaned out over, and swung my line in, and I had a bite right away. But I jerked too soon; didn't set the hook. And the line whished up and snarled in the branches over my head."

He laughed to himself at the recollection, his head back, his chin down upon his neck, deep-set eyes twinkling beneath his bushy eyebrows in the fashion I like to see. "Well, sir," he chuckled, "while I was untangling my line, I heard a regular Indian hoot, and I turned around and see Jim had caught a fish out of my pool. Quicker than a minute, I was mad as a hat.

"Yes, sir. I didn't stop for a thing. He was on the other side, by that old hemlock; and I went after him. I waded right across the ledge, running, and when he saw me coming, he jumped to meet me. Because he knew I was mad. We come together right in the black mire of that spring hole; and let me tell you, for a minute the fur flew. I guess we fought there in them woods, nobody within a mile of us, for as much as five minutes, maybe. Both of us grunting and cussing with every lick. Knee deep in that stiff, black mud. And first I'd get him down in it, and then he'd down me; and finally, when we kind of stopped for breath, he yells:

“ ‘I was only catching the fish for you, anyway, Chet.’

“And I says: ‘I’ll catch my own trout!’ And I managed to roll him under, and by that time we were both too tired to do any more.”

II

He tilted back in his chair, and we laughed together at the picture he had drawn of two wet, mad, and muddy boys. “Rolled in that mud, till we were smeared with it,” he said. And: “Didn’t speak to each other till it come time to eat lunch and we remembered we’d left it at the big hole.” He had laughed till there were tears in his eyes. Now the mirth passed; and by and by he sighed aloud, said wistfully:

“Ah, well. Poor old Jim. He drank himself to death. Died of the D T’s.”

The words were like a shock of cold water; I shivered as though the winds of tragedy had blown upon me. In my thoughts I had been seeing this Jim Snow; freckled, and covered with mud, and fighting so long as he had breath to fight; and protesting in hurt at the end: “I was only catching the fish for you.” A likeable boy, Jim Snow. . . . And in an instant the picture was shattered; there stood in its place the apparition of a dreadful, sodden, wrecked and ruined man. . . . The thing was horribly abrupt.

“For God’s sake, Chet,” I protested.

“Yes,” he said soberly. “Yes.”

I tried by a callous tone to insulate myself

against the impinging tragedy. "Went to the devil?" I hazarded.

"I guess his father drove him to it, ruined him," Chet explained. "There wasn't any harm in Jim. Just a mischievous boy, full of high spirits and fun, like a colt. His father was a churchly man; a religious man. A sober man. And he used to beat Jim, for his pranks, awfully." He shook his head, seemed faintly to shudder at the recollection. "I've seen him take Jim out into the barn; and I've heard Jim yell. Yell and screech. 'Oh, father! Father!'"

My tongue seemed sticking in my mouth. I made a brave show of refilling my pipe; the cheery flame of the match seemed to lighten the dark shadows that oppressed us both. Chet laughed again, mindful of a new incident. One of these practical jokes boys have played since there were boys to play them. But as Chet told it, tragedy overhung the tale.

"His father was a cobbler," he explained. "A good one, too. He used to make a good living out of his shop. Had a big family, and they did well. Time Jim begun to be able to work, he used to work in the shop, helping."

He warmed to his tale. "There was a bench, by the counter," he continued. "Folks used to sit down there when they had to wait. Jim was always up to something; and one day when his father was at home, Jim took a gimlet and bored a little hole in that bench. Then he fixed a brad under that hole, with a spring, and a string on it. And he took this string under the counter and back to the seat where he used to be when he was work-

ing. He fixed it with a piece of wood, like a trigger, there."

Chet, spreading his arms wide, illustrated the motion which a cobbler makes in drawing his thread through the leather. "When his arm went out like that," he said, "he could just reach this piece of wood. And when someone was sitting on the bench, some times he'd just give it a rap; and the brad would come up through and stick into them, and they'd get up in a hurry, I want to tell you."

"He couldn't do that when his father was around," I suggested.

"He never did but once," Chet agreed. "One day a boy came in that Jim didn't like. I was there that day; and I knew about this thing Jim had fixed up; and when the other boy sat down on the bench, I kind of tipped my head to Jim. I was sorry about that, after; because Jim was never one to be dared. His father was there; but Jim winked back at me, and then he gave that wooden trigger a good hard poke, and he must have rammed that brad into the boy pretty hard, because he come right up into the air, holding on to himself and yowling."

He slapped his knee at the memory. "Well, sir, he danced around there like a crazy man. I remember his name was Elnathan Hodge. He danced around and he yelled; and Jim's father stood there looking at him and frowning awfully, so that I was scared, and I edged over toward the door. Jim's father just stood, waiting for the boy to quiet down. He was a stern, solemn man; and his voice used to be enough to make us boys tremble.

“By and by he said, slow and steady: ‘What’s the matter with you, Elnathan?’

“And Elnathan says: ‘Jim stuck a needle into me.’

“The old man looked from him to Jim, and Jim was mighty busy, sewing on a sole.

“‘How did he stick a needle into you, Elnathan?’ says the old man. And Elnathan pointed to the bench. He was a big boy, bigger than us; but he was always kind of a sissy. That’s why we never liked him.

“‘Right up through that hole, it come,’ he told Jim’s father.”

“A nice boy, Elnathan!” I commented.

“Jim and me licked him for it afterwards,” Chet explained. “But that didn’t do a bit of good then. The old man went and looked under the bench and saw where the string went through under the counter; and then he followed it out through the shop to the back. He took his time about it, never looking toward Jim, pretending not to know he was there, like a cat with a hurt bird. Traced the string all back till he come to where Jim was sitting. And he didn’t say a word then, but just reached down and got Jim by the collar and started for the back room, dragging Jim after him; and Jim’s heels were clattering on the floor. After he’d shut the door, we heard the first whacks of the strap he kept there, and heard Jim yell; and then me and Elnathan put out the front door and ran away. And we could hear Jim yelling, begging. . . .”

III

He broke off abruptly, shaking his head in sorrow at the recollection. "Poor old Jim!" he murmured, under his breath. For an interval we were silent; and then I suggested that Jim's father must have done what he thought best for the boy.

Chet would not accept this suggestion. "He knew better," he said. "Any man knows better. There ought to be friendliness between a man and his son. My father used to take me fishing with him, but Jim was afraid of his father, and kept away from him, except when he had to work in the shop."

"Yet I'll bet your father tanned your hide, Chet," I argued.

Chet laughed at that. "Sure he did. But there are ways of licking a boy." He snapped his fingers to Frenchy, and the setter came to lay his chin upon Chet's knee. Reck, jealous of this attention, at once rose and demanded a caress from me. "Take a dog," said Chet. "You lick him to hurt, so he yelps with the pain of it, and the helplessness, and you can make a rogue dog out of him mighty quick. A pain that breaks down the pride of a man, or a boy, or a dog, and makes him beg for mercy, does bitter things to him. Man, or boy, or dog, he's not what he was, after that has happened to him. I've known dog breakers that whipped dogs, and made rogues or cowards out of them. And that's what Jim's father did to him."

He filled his pipe, slowly, wedging the crumbled tobacco firmly down. "Jim used to go fishing with me and father, till his father stopped him,"

he said. "Then he used to run away and go with me." He chuckled, shamefacedly. "I remember one of those times, the first time he ever got drunk, I guess." There was something like guilt in his countenance. "We'd been fishing in the rain, all morning; and when it come time to eat our lunch, Jim pulled out a little bottle. I asked him what it was, and he said: 'It's gin!'

"He'd got it out of a big bottle his father had. 'I filled the bottle up with water,' he told me. 'So he'll never know.' We were soaking wet; and we sat straddling a log that had fallen across the brook, and finished that bottle between us. There couldn't have been much more than half a pint. We drank it, and then we began to sing; and Jim was wilder than me. He got up to stand on the log, and fell off on his back in the water; and I went to pull him out and he pulled me in. The gin didn't hit me the way it did him. I didn't like it; and I only took a mouthful or two; but it got hold of Jim.

"He was seventeen years old, then; and getting big for his age. But his father beat him awfully for that. The gin and water didn't mix, so he saw someone had got at his bottle. But that was the last time he beat Jim. Jim got mad that time, and grabbed up an axe; and I guess it kind of worried and frightened the old man."

IV

We puffed at our pipes in silence for a little while; and one of the dogs rose to lay his chin upon my knee. "I can't help feeling sorry for his father, too," I said at last.

Chet nodded. "He was wrong all the time," he replied. "But no one ever regretted it more, when it was too late, and he saw what he had done to Jim." He was still for a moment, then wrote a swift "finis" to the tale.

"The last time I saw Jim," he said, "was down on the wharf at East Harbor. He was drunk that day, and his father and his brother Charley were trying to get him home. Jim was a big man then; and when he was drunk, he was strong as a bull. I remember he took Charley around the waist and threw him right off the edge of the wharf into the mud flats, and Charley landed on his face in them.

"His father tried to catch Jim's arm, and Jim turned around and hit him in the mouth and mashed his lips so they bled, and knocked him down.

"That seemed to sober Jim a little, and he sat down with his back against a pile and cried; and his father got up and came and was kneeling down with his arm around Jim; and he was crying, too. They were both crying. And it may have been the drink in Jim; but the old man hadn't been drinking.

"That's the last time I ever saw him. Crying there, with his father. Probably they both saw, then, how bad things had gone.

"But it was too late for anything to change Jim. The next year, I think it was, he died."